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CIA's Macabre Collection of Relics

Hidden away in the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters complex in Langley is one of the most fascinating museums in the area: the spy agency's historical intelligence collection of books and items of yesteryear.

The collection isn't open to the public, but we've had a peek at the contents of what might be called the Old-Timers' Corner, a macabre assortment of lethal devices used during World War II by the CIA's predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services. OSS agents performed feats of derring-do behind enemy lines in a style later fictionalized by Ian Fleming in the James Bond series.

In fact, Fleming was a Royal Navy commander close to the British Special Operations Executive, or SOE, with which the fledgling OSS worked closely to develop weapons for undercover agents. They may seem primitive by the standards of Bond's intricate contraptions, but in their day these deadly devices were state of the art. Consider these (cloak-and-) dagger items in the CIA museum:

- The Fighting Knife, a foot-long, double-edged stiletto, was also known as the "pancake flipper" because of its unique sheath. Faced with a wartime leather shortage, the bright boys at OSS found a perfect makeshift sheath in the Ecko Co.'s leather-handled spatula. The knife blade was slipped between the leather and the steel stem, and the slots in the business end of the pancake flipper could be used to hook it to a belt.

- The Smatchet was a 16½-inch-long heavy-bladed knife that combined the features of a machete and a bolo. "When properly used it will readily penetrate thin sheets of metal, such as is used in the ordinary

steel helmets" of the Nazis, an OSS description explained.

- A .22-cal. automatic pistol that was so silent that when OSS head "Wild Bill" Donovan fired it in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's office as a demonstration, the president, whose back was turned, never heard it.

- The Stinger was a .22-cal. single-shot pistol just 3¼ inches long—about the size of a king-size cigarette. An OSS manual, while noting that it could not be reloaded and was only for extreme short-range use, said the Stinger was "inexpensive, available in large quantities and can be distributed widely among native patriots of occupied countries."

- A one-shot, .38-cal. pistol mounted on the back of a glove had a plunger-trigger that extended past the knuckles when the fist was clenched. It was in effect an explosive set of brass knuckles, detonated by contact with the victim's body.

- Finally, there were the grim, button-shaped capsules for use in a hopeless situation to prevent disclosure of information under torture: the infamous "L" pills (L for lethal). The pills would cause almost instantaneous death from potassium cyanide when crushed between the teeth, but could be swallowed whole without ill effects if the captured agent's fortunes suddenly brightened.

The OSS made sure there were enough L pills to go around. One inventory for a North African base included "500 coveralls, 500 rubber helmets, 500 spine pads, 500 pairs heel pads, 500 pairs crepe ankle bandages, 500 pairs 'A' type parachute [and] 1,000 units L tablets."